

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 GUATEMALA 002942

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [KDEM](#) [GT](#)

SUBJECT: EMBASSY ELECTION OBSERVATION: DISORGANIZATION, NOT VIOLENCE, THE REAL PROBLEM

1. Summary: Guatemalans refused to be intimidated by predictions of violence and fraud, and braved the disorganized election process to vote in record numbers. Thirty-nine Embassy observers of the November 9 national elections witnessed this display of democratic participation by Guatemalans who turned out in droves, despite rampant predictions of electoral violence and fraud. The turnout (58% est.) is all the more impressive in light of disorganization in the voter registration system, which caused some voters outside the capital to wait up to 10 hours to cast their ballots; the average wait in the capital was closer to two hours. Separating voters by those who updated their registration caused confusion nationwide, and had the perverse effect of adding to the wait for those voters who had gone to the trouble to update their voting information. Poorly planned line management, compounded by poor procedures to address problems encountered on voting day, caused many voters outside the capital to become frustrated; it also disenfranchised a number of intending voters, who gave up before voting. EmbOffs did not witness the widespread fraud and violence that many Guatemalans had feared. Instead, administrative difficulties at the voting booths were the major impediments to voting. End Summary.

Background: Embassy Participation in OAS Observation

2. Thirty-nine Embassy officers observed the Guatemalan elections, under the umbrella of the OAS Election Observation Mission. The Embassy sent five teams to observe the electoral process outside the capital and to participate in the OAS quick count. Those teams visited the demographically and geographically diverse provinces of San Marcos, Esquintla, Alta Verapaz, El Progreso, Jutiapa, Sacatepequez, and Chimaltenango. Twenty other Embassy observers, including three EmbOffs from Embassy San Salvador, observed the elections in and around Guatemala City and in the indigenous communities west of Guatemala City. RSO provided security for the team which visited Escuintla province, where electoral violence was expected in several municipalities. On Election Day and at an election observation post-mortem held November 12, Embassy election observers shared their impressions, which included common themes and also stark contrasts particular to the sites they visited.

Bad Planning/Implementation, Esp. Outside the Capital

3. While most voting stations opened on time on Election Day, the first and strongest impression that struck our observers was of disorganization. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), responsible for organization and training of election volunteers, set up separate voting tables for voters who had and had not updated their registration. However, each voting table was designed to receive 600 registered voters. As a result, the lines at tables for non-updated voters were short, with only 150-200 people showing up in the course of the day, while the lines at the updated voter tables often exceeded 500. In addition, many voters did not appear in the electoral register due to computer problems with the lists. These voters were required to seek verification of their status from local TSE representatives, which were unprepared to deal with these requests expeditiously. Most of our observers reported a generally calm and even festive atmosphere. Others noted a more tense atmosphere, with voters yelling at the poll workers and expressing frustration over long lines. Line cutters were roundly rebuffed (real democracy in the making!). Throughout the country, partitioned voting stations where up to four voters could mark their ballots at one time were too few in number and had no screens to ensure privacy.

4. Outside the capital, polling stations seemed adequately supplied but often were not adequately marked. Signs were often not posted in a central or prominent location, and were difficult to follow and impossible to understand by illiterate persons. In some instances government officials assigned to assist voters were themselves illiterate. There was significant confusion about how to apply the indelible ink. Some election officials helpfully provided tissues to wipe the ink off voter's fingers immediately after application. Others apparently did not shake the bottle, and our observers and media reported complaints that the ink, as a result, did not work. Due to confusion and lack of

guidance, voters often waited several hours in one line to learn that they were not on the list at the table, were sent to other tables where their names did not appear, and finally were sent to the TSE office, where long lines and few personnel added further to the wait. Some who put up with this returned to the voting booth only to find it closed after 6:00 p.m. EmbOffs estimate that in some remote towns, up to 25% of voters left or could not vote because of the disorganization.

15. In Guatemala City, by contrast, most voting places finished processing long lines by closing time. At a few sites, remaining voters were permitted to stay to vote after 6:00 p.m. but the doors were closed to new voters. The trend throughout the city was that the lines and confusion were much less than in the countryside, and although there were still waits of several hours, all voters were able to cast their ballots. Although performance varied, in general Embassy observers found much higher levels of organization at the capital's polling stations, which were generally larger, with between four and 30 voting tables each. Some included marimba bands and the atmosphere, initially tense as long lines formed early, became more festive and relaxed as the lines diminished. International and domestic observers from the OAS, EU, University of San Carlos and Human Rights Ombudsman's office were present in most capital voting stations. Public Ministry personnel were also visible at many voting stations in the capital. Most voting tables in the capital were also being observed by party representatives of the five larger political parties, who were generally cooperative at the tables we observed. TSE officials at one site complained of delays associated with elderly voters who took time at the voting tables to mark their ballots. Elsewhere, Embassy observers noticed that elderly and handicapped voters were allowed to pass to the front of the line by organizers.

Violence and Fraud Low, Despite Fears

16. Though initial tension and growing frustration with the voting process was apparent through the course of election day, our observers did not witness any violence. One of our observer teams, visiting Purhula, Baja Verapaz province, left the voting station at 6:00 p.m. on the advice of local police, who could not guarantee security. Some voters there had begun drinking (despite the ban on alcohol sales) after a long and frustrating day waiting to vote.

17. Our observers did not witness fraud directly; however, the general disorganization of the voting process fed conspiracy theories and allegations of fraud against the FRG. We heard hearsay reports of vote-buying by the FRG in the towns of Rodeo, San Marcos and Villanueva, Guatemala province. In Rodeo, political parties traded accusations of selling beer and facilitating the use of false identification cards ("cedulas"). A Christian Democratic Party mayoral candidate in Rodeo claimed to have received a death threat from the Progressive Liberator Party.

Big Turnout Makes Wait Longer

18. Guatemalans refused to be intimidated by predictions of violence and fraud, and braved the disorganized election process to vote in record numbers. Observers noted a high turnout of women and young voters, even in rural areas. Some voters waited up to 10 hours to vote. Long lines were caused by the disorganized voting process combined with an exceptionally high turn out. Lines were so long and closely packed that one observer saw a line of nearly 100 voters fall like dominoes after a man in the back of the line tripped; the last man fell face first onto the voting table. Outside the capital, where voting peaked between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. it was common to hear stories of people leaving their homes early in the morning only to wait all day to vote. In the town of Guanaguazapa, Escuintla province, a man told our observers he had left his house at 5:00 a.m., walked 6 miles to vote at the 7:00 a.m. opening, and still had not voted as of 2:00 p.m. At 10:30 a.m. in the town of Puerto San Jose, Escuintla, voters told us "we have moved 6 meters in 3 hours." In El Progreso, one of our observers saw an elderly blind person vote after waiting for 3 hours in oppressive heat. A man we spoke to in Iztapa, Escuintla province, told us he had entered the line knowing that it was going to take him a minimum of 4 hours before he would be able to cast his ballot.

Comment

19. Despite these hardships, voters across the country voted in record numbers, reflecting a ground swell of participation in this controversial election. In hindsight, the pre-election hype over possible violence and electoral fraud may have distracted from planning for what turned out to be

the true culprit on election day: the disorganization of the voting process. Our observers have some common-sense suggestions and the OAS has already made recommendations based on its observation for fixes to the TSE. With any luck, the second round of voting, on December 28 to select a president and vice president, will go more smoothly.

HAMILTON